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On the sociolinguistic typology
of linguistic complexity loss

Peter Trudgill

Agder University

The nature of the human language faculty is the same the world over, and has been so ever since humans became human. This paper, however, considers the possibility that, because of the influence which social structure can have on language structure, this common faculty may produce structurally different types of language under different sociolinguistic conditions. Changing sociolinguistic conditions in the modern world are likely to have the consequence that, in time, the only languages remaining in the world will be severely atypical of how languages have been throughout most of human history.

1. SOCIOLINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY. Workers involved with language documentation are only too well aware that a very large proportion of the world's languages are likely to be lost to us before very long. There is one aspect of this language loss, however, which is not often mentioned and which makes the task of documentation and description even more urgent. In this paper I discuss this particular aspect of language loss from the perspective of *sociolinguistic typology*. By sociolinguistic typology, I mean a form of linguistic typology which is sociolinguistically informed, asks sociolinguistic questions, and tries to supply sociolinguistic answers. The assumption behind sociolinguistic typology is that the nature of the human language faculty is the same the world over, and has been so ever since humans became human. But because of the influence social structure can have on language structure, I have long argued that this common faculty of the human mind may produce different types of language in different places and at different moments in human history (see, for example, Trudgill 1992).

A further assumption made in this paper is that the "equicomplexity hypothesis" has no validity (Shosted 2006). This hypothesis – that all languages are equally complex – has for many decades been rejected implicitly – or even explicitly (e.g. Trudgill 1983) – by sociolinguists, who have long accepted that language contact can produce simplification – as in the development of creoles, and creoloids such as Afrikaans, through language contact; and of koinés through dialect mixture. Obviously, languages are less complex after simplification than before. And if a language can be more or less complex at different stages of its history, then clearly some languages can be more complex than others. This point is more explicitly tackled in a number of papers in Sampson et al. (2009).

A sociolinguistic-typological approach to linguistic complexity (Trudgill 2011) then leads us to ask: Why are some languages more complex than others? Are sociolinguistic answers to this question available? And what are the socio-structural conditions necessary for the development of linguistic complexity?

To answer this question we need first to discuss what complexity might be. My brief answer (see further Trudgill 2011) is – and I acknowledge that there are a number of other possible answers – that complexification consists of factors such as: increase in irregularity, increase in morphological opacity, increase in syntagmatic redundancy, and increase in morphological categories. These are all factors which make for *L2* [second language] *difficulty* – linguistic phenomena which are difficult for post-critical-period adult learners to acquire.

2. MATURE PHENOMENA AND SOCIETIES OF INTIMATES. According to Östen Dahl, "there is a significant overlap between … those linguistic features that are most recalcitrant in second language learning" and "mature features" (Dahl 2004: 286). Much L2 difficulty, that is, has to do with *mature phenomena*. According to Dahl, mature phenomena are linguistic features which imply a lengthy period of historical development – they "presuppose a non-trivial prehistory" (2004: 2). Dahl mentions, for example, syntactic agreement as "belonging to the later stages of maturation processes" (2004: 197). Other examples of features which take very many generations to come into being include, amongst others, the development of inflectional morphology and fusional languages generally; grammatical gender systems; and the large-scale grammatical marking of evidentiality. (On the L2 difficulty of inflectional morphology, see Dahl 2004: 286, and Meisel 1997.)

The socio-structural conditions necessary for development of complexity will thus be those which favor the growth of mature phenomena. And these conditions will then rather clearly be those which produce long – generally centuries or even millennia – periods of uninterrupted linguistic change. Note, however, that such conditions simply provide a background against which complexity *can* develop. They provide matrices "which permit but do not necessarily and inexorably produce complexity. We cannot say that complexification will inevitably occur under such conditions – languages spoken in low-contact communities will certainly be found which demonstrate no great complexity" (Trudgill 2011: 89).

The types of interruption most likely to interfere with the development of mature phenomena will be those which lead to the simplification which is brought about by certain types of adult language learning (in certain types of sociolinguistic situation Trudgill see 2011: Chapter 2), due to factors such as social instability and linguistic contact. We can deduce that social factors which favor complexity thus include *high social stability* and *low contact*, where "contact" must be specifically interpreted to mean certain forms of contact involving post-critical-period – i.e. adult and adolescent as opposed to child-language-learning.

Linguistic complexity also develops most readily – although, once again, not inevitably – in *societies of intimates* (see Trudgill 2011 for detailed argumentation; and see also Wray & Grace 2007, Wohlgemuth 2010). According to Givón & Young (2002), hunter-gatherers belong to "societies of intimates" – societies "where all generic information is shared" (Givón 1979: 297); and which contrasts with "societies of strangers", the larger and more complex human groups which began to develop around 10,000 BC and which most of us inhabit today. For nearly all of human history, we lived in societies characterized not only by

stability, and low contact, but also by *small size*, *dense social networks*, and *informational homogeneity* = *large amounts of shared information*. Examples of linguistic complexity which linguists have specifically associated with societies of intimates include evidentials – "complex evidential systems, in their vast majority, are confined to languages with small-ish numbers of speakers, spoken in small, traditional societies" (Aikhenvald 2004) – and the remarkable generationally-marked pronoun system of Onya Darat which, as described by Tadmor (forthcoming), cannot work except in a community where everybody knows everybody else.

I therefore suggest that the major complexity-producing social factors include: small size, dense social networks, large amounts of shared information, high stability, and low contact. The relevance of these societal features stems from the fact that, linguistically, complex-ification at the morphological and morpho-syntactic levels arises as a result of linguistic processes such as fusion, reanalysis, and refunctionalization, plus a complex of processes leading to grammaticalization – and with an important role at many points for phonology – which are all processes requiring considerable periods of time in order to develop undis-turbed and go to completion.

My sociolinguistic-typological point of view is that in large, high-contact, unstable com-munities with loose social networks, such lengthy periods are less likely to be available. And not only are mature phenomena less likely to develop, they are also very vulnerable to being lost through simplification if high-contact situations develop: mature phenomena "are highly prone to being filtered out in suboptimal language acquisition" (Dahl 2004: 286).

3. THE PRESENT IS NOT LIKE THE PAST. One of the fundamental bases of modern historical linguistics has been the *uniformitarian principle* (Labov 1972). Knowledge of processes that operated in the past can be inferred by observing ongoing processes in the present. This leads to the methodological principle of *using the present to explain the past*: we cannot try to explain past changes in language by resorting to explanations that would not work for modern linguistic systems.

But there is one very important respect in which the present is not like the past at all. Human language came into existence perhaps something like 100,000 years ago (Corballis 1999, Dixon 1997) or even considerably earlier (Evans 2010). The earliest date for a post-neolithic society anywhere in the world is about 5,000-6,000 years ago, in the Middle East (Langer 1987), and later, sometimes very much later, everywhere else. This means that hu-man languages were spoken in neolithic and pre-neolithic societies for at least 95% of their history (cf. Wichmann forthcoming). It is therefore probable that widespread adult-only language contact is a mainly post-neolithic and indeed a mainly modern phenomenon, asso-ciated with the last 2,000 years, during which time the world's human population has grown enormously from about 200 million to 7,000 million. Given that the development of large, fluid societies of strangers is also a post-neolithic and indeed mainly modern phenomenon, then a sociolinguistic-typological perspective suggests that the dominant standard modern languages in the world today are likely to be seriously atypical of how languages have been for nearly all of human history.

I recall once asking an erudite generative linguist how he would handle switch-reference in his current theoretical model, and he replied that he did not know, explaining that switch-reference was "something you only get in exotic languages" which he did not know anything

about. I would argue however that in fact these "exotic languages" are precisely what we must make sure that we do know about. These languages, with their mature phenomena, are actually, especially from a diachronic perspective, not exotic at all. They are normal. This is what human languages must have been like throughout most of the tens of thousands of years of human history on this planet. It is the creoloids and koinés and creoles that have developed in the last two thousand years, and particularly in the last 500 years, that are weird and unrepresentative.

Robert Orr (1999) pointed out that Bob Dixon's (1972) ground-breaking study of the Australian language Dyirbal, which "revolutionised our view of ergativity" (Comrie 1978: 393), was a close-run thing: Dyirbal was a dead language before the next decade was out. As Schmalstieg (1980: 18) says, if it had not been for the timing of Dixon's fieldwork, "it seems quite possible that the Dyirbal population might have disappeared without a trace, and notions of ergativity would have remained unhampered by new facts".

How many other "new facts" about human language are we going to miss out on? A very large proportion of the world's isolated languages and dialects, and of languages and dialects spoken in small tightly-knit communities, may not be with us much longer. It would not be at all surprising if in a few generations' time there were no languages at all in the world with any of their typical social characteristics, and therefore, I would argue, with any of their typical linguistic characteristics. The human language faculty can be assumed to have remained unchanged for very many millennia indeed; but the sociolinguistic-typological matrices in which linguistic change occurs have changed significantly. It is therefore not totally unreasonable to suppose that, in the future, we are increasingly unlikely ever again to see the development of, say, highly inflectional fusional language varieties. And I submit that complex features such as large evidential systems, quadral number, switch-reference systems, polysynthesis, and generationally marked pronouns as described by Tadmor, are unlikely to be created afresh in the societies of strangers that predominate in modern conditions. These are mature linguistic phenomena that will no longer be given time to develop. And where they have already developed, they are also now relatively likely to be lost, because of the current increase in adult high-contact situations, because of increases in community size, and because of language death. In other words, they might eventually disappear from the world's languages altogether.

4. CONCLUSION.   If therefore we want to learn more about the inherent nature of linguistic systems, we have to urgently focus most of our attention on linguistic structures and linguistic changes of the types that occur in the ever-dwindling number of low-contact, dense social network varieties of language in the modern world. It is of course highly relevant that, happily, current forms of language documentation aim to document not only particular languages, but also the sociolinguistic characteristics of the speech communities in which they are spoken. But if we want to build up an accurate picture of the nature of human languages throughout human history, we have to hurry, not only because, as workers in the field of language documentation are only too well aware, most of the world's languages are in danger, but also because *most of the languages that will be left behind will increasingly tend to be of a single, historically atypical type.*

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Peter Trudgill
peter.trudgill@unifr.ch